

Response to PacNet #17 “Untying North Korean ‘nots’”

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Ehsan M. Ahrari replies:

Dealing correctly with a nuclear North Korea (NK) is an issue that has defied the United States. Our standard and basic response since 2005 has been to persuade that country to unravel its nuclear weapons program. That was precisely what the Clinton administration tried to do, vis-à-vis India and Pakistan in the aftermath of their nuclear explosions of 1998, by conducting a series of so-called “strategic dialogues.” That did not happen, but we unreservedly supported India’s membership in the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG), but not Pakistan’s. So, there is no clear purpose underlying America’s approach toward a nuclear NK. Knowing that it will never abandon its nuclear weapons, we have no clue what the second most acceptable option is for us. While it is up to the US government to spell out the modalities of the second-best option, I can make a recommendation: accept a nuclear-armed NK, as we have accepted a nuclear armed India and Pakistan.

Another problem on the part of the United States is that we never recognized NK’s legitimate security apprehensions. NK has been threatened by various US presidents with the use of nuclear weapons, convincing it that developing nuclear weapons is the best way to ensure regime survival. Even though the People’s Republic of China entered the Korean War to stop Douglas MacArthur’s aspirations of invading China, it is hard to believe that China would enter a nuclear conflict to save NK from a US nuclear attack today. The PRC no longer has to worry about that calamitous option, because there is a close to zero percent chance of the US attacking a nuclear NK, as long as it does not make an irrational mistake of threatening South Korea or Japan.

The comparison of US-Israel and China-NK is incorrect and irrelevant. We never wanted Israel to give up its nuclear weapons. We may have made statements to that effect, but only for PR purposes, and we were never serious. I would argue that a nuclear-armed Israel minimizes the US fear of any Arab country arming itself with nuclear weapons, simply because Israel would not allow it. So, there never was an issue of the US “pressuring” Israel to give up its nuclear weapons.

When East Asian experts talk about using the China card against a nuclear NK, they are only discussing the possibility of persuading the PRC to pressure NK to engage in meaningful negotiations on the issue. The ultimate purpose of that pressure is no longer (even if it was in the past) to sway NK to unravel its nuclear weapons program. As long as we recognize that NK’s nuclear arsenal will only increase in size and sophistication, we still may use the China card for some

meaningful negotiations, maybe for lowering tensions between the two Koreas.

As far as I am concerned, a nuclear NK will always serve as a model for a nuclear weapons-aspiring nation. The Obama administration shrewdly understood that fact and at least postponed the emergence of a nuclear Iran to a distant future by negotiating the nuclear deal with it.

No one knows whether the Trump administration will build on that framework and work to bring Iran into accepting the highly lopsided nuclear order. BTW, that order refuses to punish countries like India, Pakistan, and Israel for rejecting the “rules of nuclear weapons-related games,” but insists that countries like Iran should never acquire nuclear weapons, while it is frequently threatened with military action by the United States actions (all options are on the table) and Israel.

Mr. Cossa and Mr. Glosserman’s response:

We thank Ehsan Ahrari for his comments. The North Korean nuclear issue has vexed three successive US administrations, and Pyongyang has been a threat to regional security since the Korean War. Yet, as we have noted previously, North Korea is the land of bad policy options. The US and its allies (and other concerned states) cannot acquiesce to a nuclear armed North Korea, even if we have done so (perhaps foolishly) with other states. North Korea has a record of destabilizing actions and proliferation that impact directly on US equities and interests. That means US administrations have to be concerned and address this threat.

It is incorrect to say that the US has ignored North Korean concerns: the Bush administration offered explicit security assurances during the Six-Party Talks. Pyongyang pocketed that concession and promptly moved on. Obama offered an outstretched hand and was greeted with a missile launch. We note too that it is North Korea that makes explicit and worrying nuclear-related threats against the US and its allies, not the other way around. Pyongyang’s developing an offensive nuclear strike capability raises the costs to Washington and Seoul of not doing anything; it makes the North less rather than more secure.

In addition, our comparison of China-North Korea relations with those of the US and Israel sought to demonstrate the limits of influence that allies have. The US has been unable to keep Israel from expanding settlements; to believe that Beijing can force Pyongyang to give up a weapon that it deems essential to its security (and has written into its constitution) is fantasy. That is not to say that the North will NEVER give up those weapons – only that China can’t force it to do so. Mr. Ahrari says that the US merely wants China to help push North Korea back to the negotiating table. We think US expectations of China are much higher than that.

Accepting a nuclear North Korea as we did in the case of India and Pakistan may be consistent, but that does not make it the right choice. We should have done more to deter Delhi and Islamabad from making that choice. But we should not double down on bad decisions. Conversations with allies in Seoul and Tokyo lead us to believe that US acquiescence to a nuclear-armed North Korea would create potentially insurmountable problems for both alliances. That alone distinguishes the situation in Northeast Asia from that of South Asia and raises the stakes for the US.

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